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# International Phases of the Land Question

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**S**UPERFICIALLY the land question would seem to be wholly a national or a local question with little or no bearing on international problems. Fundamentally, however, there are few questions of more far-reaching and enduring international interest. The currents of human migration in the past have been mainly in pursuit of land. Land policies, of course, had nothing to do with the migrations of primitive tribes. These were mainly migrations of conquest. Wherever unpeopled lands have lain within the jurisdiction of governments strong enough to repel invaders the peopling of such lands has been a question of the land policy of the government.

## LAND POLICY OF THE UNITED STATES

Our own national history has been affected by our land policy more, perhaps, than by any other single phase of our governmental activity. If one were asked to name the most important institution in American life up to the end of the nineteenth century he would not go far wrong if he were to name the *Prairie Schooner*, not so much for what it was as for what it symbolized. It symbolized the joining of man and nature—the making of effective contacts between population and land, than which nothing could be more fundamental. The establishment of allodial tenure in the northwest territory by the ordinance of 1787 was quite as important in giving character to our national life as the better known provision prohibiting slavery and guaranteeing a republican form of government. This popular system of land tenure made land the private property in fee simple of the individual to whom it was deeded by the government.

This kind of land tenure satisfied the land hunger of the adventuring, pioneering type of man more fully than a less popular and individualistic form of tenure could possibly have done. It therefore tended to stimulate westward migration as no other policy could possibly have done. Besides it made land a merchantable

commodity and this tends to put land in the long run into the hands of those who can use it most effectively. The reason for this is that any piece of land is worth more to a farmer who can use it effectively than to one who cannot. Where no obstacle is put in the way of the free transfer of land, that fact will in the long run put each piece of land in the hands of the most efficient user.

Westward migration, however, was not wholly a local or national affair. The landless men came not simply from our own population but from all countries of Europe. If one had charted on a map of the world the currents of human migration he would, to begin with, have made the most important map ever drawn, and what is more to the point of the present discussion the map would have shown that these currents of human migration paid, apparently, little attention to national boundaries. Back of these migratory currents, and in a sense causing them, or at least making them possible, was the liberal land policy of our federal government.

#### INFLUENCE OF THE MONROE DOCTRINE

The Monroe Doctrine likewise had its part in determining the course of these currents. Land seekers from Europe naturally preferred to seek land under a stable and intelligent government, rather than under an unstable and undependable government. The desire of European governments for colonies and dependencies was not wholly due to the rapacity of autocratic rulers. It was in part due to the unwillingness of land seekers from those countries to settle under the turbulent and unstable governments of Latin America. Our enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine made it certain that land seekers who came to the Western continent would find a stable and dependable government nowhere else than within the boundaries of the United States. By concentrating the currents of international migration upon our own shores, we enormously hastened the sale of our public lands and the settlement of our western territories. There is no evidence that this was the deliberate intention of the propounders of the Monroe Doctrine, but there can be no doubt that it was one of the results.

One of the uncertainties of the period on which the world is now

entering is the possible redirection of these currents of migration. There is no inherent necessity compelling them to set westward rather than eastward. It has happened since the discovery of America, that vacant lands lay to the West rather than to the East. The prehistoric migrations into Europe tended westward rather than eastward for the same reason. Everywhere the tendency of rural migrations is away from densely peopled to sparsely peopled lands.

The coming of the Turk into the western world was the last great disturbance which turned the currents of migration in a new direction. Europe was already beginning to flow back upon Asia when the Turk arrived. It was this fact, as much as any other, which caused Europe to face westward again instead of eastward. The probable elimination of the Turk as a result of the great war may reverse the process. Eastward Ho! may be the cry of the land hungry during the next century. "Ararat or bust" may by the middle of the present century play a part similar to that played by "Pike's Peak or bust" in the middle of the last. A liberal land policy in Asia Minor and Mesopotamia under some kind of a stable and dependable government will in all probability turn land seekers in that direction. Without a liberal land policy and without a stable government land seekers will have no inducement to turn in that direction.

#### EXPANDING VERSUS PENT-UP CIVILIZATIONS

Another result, almost equal to migration in importance to all countries, and like it depending upon land policies, is the question of the expanding *versus* the pent-up type of civilization. An expanding civilization is one in which population may increase indefinitely through the expansion of the opportunities for gaining subsistence. This will require an agricultural population to spread over wider areas or to colonize. It will require that an urban population should expand its markets. A pent-up civilization is one which maintains itself permanently in a given territory. In agriculture this means the continuous *morcellement* of land or the development of a numerous agricultural proletariat. An urban population must become stabilized both as to numbers and types of industry, or it must press incessantly upon the means of subsistence. Both rural and urban populations are faced by one,

and only one, alternative. It will either become over-populated and be forced to reduce its standard of living, or it will exercise birth control.

Types of National Civilization	Expanding	Rural	Spreading beyond national boundaries
		Urban	Enlarging national boundaries
	Pent-up	Oriental	Enlarging markets in other countries
		Occidental	Building colonies with which to trade
			Overpopulation
			Forced migration
			Exercising birth control
			<i>Morcellement</i> of land

The land policy of the Code Napoleon requiring the subdivision of estates, while it looked fair enough, undoubtedly tended to encourage each rising generation to hang around home, waiting for the old folks to die in order to get a share of the land. This tended to develop a pent-up rather than an expanding type of civilization. The English system of primogeniture, while monstrously unfair, had the opposite effect. The younger sons, knowing that there was nothing to be gained by waiting for a share of the family estate, were forced out into the world to seek their fortunes independently. It is no accident that those nations that retained primogeniture, or something like it, such as England and Prussia, have continued to expand, while those that adopted the Code Napoleon ceased thereafter to expand.

The United States, however, during the greater part of the nineteenth century continued to expand in spite of our adoption of allodial tenure and something similar to the Code Napoleon in regard to the subdivision of estates. This, however, is primarily due to the artificial encouragement which the federal government gave to land settlement through the preëmption, homestead and timber culture laws. Since the practical exhaustion of all that part of our national domain which is fit for settlement, further expansion has tended to carry our rural people beyond our frontiers into Canada and Mexico. Recently, however, the name of democracy has been invoked against further expansion when it involves the spreading of our people beyond our present national boundaries. Notice is served upon American enterprises that if they seek to colonize as farmers, or expand their business as merchants and manufacturers beyond our boundaries, they do so at

their own risk. Our present political tendencies, in short, are calculated to encourage the pent-up type of civilization and to hinder further expansion.

#### PROBLEMS OF AN EXPANDING CIVILIZATION

This undoubtedly raises large international questions, though like the question of human migration it is too large and important to be of any interest to the average statesman. An expanding civilization leads to a clash of interests between nations and races. Each expanding race must sooner or later come into competition for lands and markets with some other expanding race. This will require diplomacy of the greatest wisdom and skill if we are to avoid future wars. Each nation can develop a pent-up civilization without competing with any other nation which is likewise content with a pent-up civilization. In this case, however, birth control is the only agency that can avoid ultimate overpopulation. These alternatives present a rather hard choice but it is the only choice before us. There is no other alternative.

The possibilities of further expansion within our present boundaries are scarcely yet appreciated. Along our northern border lies a strip of cut over timber lands extending from Maine to Minnesota, which is capable of providing a vast addition to our present food supply. Though too far north for our greatest crop, corn, it is not too far north for wheat, oats, rye and barley and it is ideal potato land. Potatoes may yet become our greatest food crop as they have already become in Europe. Another area, equal in extent and in possibilities of food production, is our southern coastal plain extending from Florida to southern Texas. Lying just south of the cotton belt it is ideal land for almost all truck crops and is especially adapted to the sweet potato, which is even more wonderful in its possibilities than the white potato, and is in fact one of the most remarkable food plants known to man.

#### STEPS TO BE TAKEN

Four things are necessary to bring these vast areas under food crops: (1) A population capable of consuming the crops and able to pay a remunerative price for them; (2) Means of transportation capable of carrying these crops to the population; (3) A change in the standard of living which will make the people willing to eat more potatoes, both white and sweet, than at present;

(4) A liberal land policy with respect to the reclamation and settlement of those lands.

Time itself will produce the first three conditions; we must take the initiative with respect to the fourth. Since these lands do not now belong to the national domain they are, of course, not open to settlement as our western lands were. A liberal policy on the part of our state governments in coöperation with the federal government may bring them under cultivation as rapidly as the needs of our population call for them.

There is also the dry farming and the irrigation farming of the arid west and the reclamation of considerable areas of swampy lands in the humid area to be considered. The possibility of more intensive cultivation of the lands already under cultivation is not to be ignored. This, however, can only come about through higher prices for crops or the development of better tools and machinery, unless it is to result in a reduction of the standard of living of the farming people. But there is no reason to doubt that the inventors will be equal to the task of devising instruments which will reduce the expense of intensive cultivation, as they have devised instruments to reduce the expense of extensive cultivation in the last century.

With all these possibilities in mind there is no doubt that we can, if we are forced to it, produce twice as much food in this country as we are now producing, and support approximately twice our present population without seriously reducing our standard of living or greatly increasing the prices of food products. Barring unforeseen inventions it is likely that some reduction in the standard of living will be necessary and some further increase in the prices of food. While technically the habit of eating a slightly larger proportion of potatoes would be counted as a reduction of the standard of living, it is not such a reduction as needs to be considered a real hardship.

We can, in short, expand our population considerably within our own boundaries without expanding our foreign markets or colonizing our farmers. In so far as we can do this we shall avoid competition either for lands or for markets with other peoples. This is a matter of the utmost importance. International competition for lands and markets, since the religious wars, has been the most prolific cause of war. Anything which can soften or postpone that competition becomes, therefore, a basic condition of peace.